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Translation Studies:

Some Problematic Aspects of Arabic Poetry Translation

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Abstract

From the time of its foundation, translation has not stopped to play its essential role of conveying messages across languages and cultural difficulties. Among all types of problems discussed in translation, the translation of poetry, in general, requires a deep understanding of the connotative meaning of words and of other shades of meanings accompanying the use of a different vocabulary in poetry. This study highlights the need for a compromise between practical and theoretical translation in guessing right the translated material by making efforts to minimize the gap between the original poem and its translation.

The aim of this study is twofold. The first part will present some perceptions given by some academic translators dealt with Arabic poetry translation in different periods of time. The second will focus on the three schools of modern Arabic poetry as classified by Arab scholars. This study also discusses some terminological terms used in Arabic poetry and how they are rendered into English.

Keywords: Translation; Metre; Rhyme; connotation; neo-classicism; romanticism; Modernism.

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1. Introduction

Many people think that the translation of poetry is impossible, but this is not the case. A translation which takes linguistic aspects and stylistic devices into account stands a good chance of success. One of the most important issues in the translation of poetry concerns the nature of poetry and of the language it uses. Poetry is the most powerful form of language, wherein, as Tafdrup and Born state [18], language achieves the summit of its emotional response and its complicated construction requiring that the translation must reflect its original material as closely as possible. Translators should endeavour to reach that summit in their translated copy.

However, not only the word and its meaning are important in the process of translation, especially of poetry, but there are also various elements that make poetry different from prose in literary writing. Poetry should be seen in terms of various elements, for instance form, imagery, rhythm, and rhyme. These elements of the poem are all working together towards an integrated whole with each element presenting only a part of the whole. In other words, they are used for a specific purpose as a part of the design. These elements usually have to be considered together because of their interdependence on one another. This interdependence is one of the main problems that translators face in translating literary language into other terms. However, such interdependence requires, as Ben Bennani [10] maintains "...systematic analysis of the text, as well as sympathetic understanding of its intertextuality".

Translation of poetry becomes even more especially complicated when the two languages are completely different as are Arabic and English. Polk is one of the translators of Arabic poetry who cites some comments in translating one of the Arabic Odes, composed by Labid Ibn Rabiah. Polk asserts that his translation is an attempt to render that ode into a fairly literal translation in English. He acknowledges the impossibility of capturing in English all the literary qualities of the poem because of the sharp difference between English and Arabic [26].

Beeston, who gives a literal translation of a few selected Arabic poems in his book *Selections from the poetry of Bashar*, acknowledges, like others, the impossibility of translating poetry from one language to another, especially when those languages are widely unrelated. In order to give a reasonable translation for students to appreciate the Arabic original, Beeston uses a fairly free translation when he discovers that literal translation is impossible. Moreover, in order to achieve an intelligible rendering, he does not hesitate to add words which clarify the meaning of the Arabic originals [2].

Capt. Johnson in 1893 translated the seven poems suspended at the walls of Ka'ba from Arabic. His translation, as he says in his preface, is intended to be an aid to the students, and thus he uses the literal method in translating these poems, with some clarifying explanations. Another distinguished scholar and translator, Nicholson (1922) in his revised edition published "*Translations of Eastern Poetry and Prose*" cites some verses of Arabic poetry [21]. Nicholson wrote another book [13] in 1907 "*A literary History of the Arabs*" which presents Arabic literature within the framework of the history of Islam and shows his sensitivity and feeling for the beauty of language and imagery [20]. Arberry, in his book "*Poems of al-Mutanabbi*", acknowledges the problems of translating Arabic poetry when he says that Arabic poetry of the mannered kind causes several

difficulties to translators, the matter which makes very little of al-Mutanabi's poetry to be rendered into literary English [9].

Most English translators of Arabic poetry agree that their task was very difficult because of the special characteristics of Arabic language and Arabic poetry. Such conclusion is shared by Arab scholars who were concerned with Arabic poetry translation; M. Badawi indicates that this job is very difficult since the translator's attention is shattered between form and content [14]. Badawi's statement shows clearly that a poem represents a fine balance of highly sensitive elements (form and content); the change of any one of which will upset that balance. Jayyusi also believes that Arabic poetry translation into English is a difficult task. She justifies her claim by the fact that the two languages and their cultures are completely different. Moreover, Jayyusi maintains that the translations of poems, which are based on rhetorical expressions, are too difficult since these features are considered as a part of the poems' semantic signification. Jayyusi believes that the more modernist Arab poets are the further away from those devices their poetry is, and therefore the more easily translatable [22].

Since this article is concerned with the problems of translating modern Arabic poetry into English, one might introduce the new types or schools of this poetry and their characteristics. In fact, modern Arabic poetry is regarded by numerous scholars as one of the greatest volumes that cause several problems for translators. The volume of modern Arabic poetry (1800-1970) that is translated into English is quite impressive despite the enormous and seemingly insurmountable problems which face the undertaking of such a task.

To begin with, Arabic and English belong to entirely different families of language that contrast widely in terms of mentality and syntax. Modern Arabic poetry, which is the topic of this article, started to appear in the second half of the nineteenth century where new poetic models started to prevail side by side with the traditional type of classical Arabic poetry. However, the new types of poetry, such as that represented by neoclassicism, romanticism, and modernism, come into sight as a result of contact between the Arabs and the Western culture at that time. This is exactly what M. Badawi [14] means when he says that like the other branches of modern Arabic literature, modern Arabic poetry is a gradual product of the confrontation between the traditional medieval values and the modern cultural value of the west. Without such contact many developments would not have been possible. Through the translations of western poetry into Arabic language, the impact of such poetry on modern Arabic poetry was very remarkable as Badawi states; "The effect of Arabic translations of western poetry on the development of modern Arabic poetry from the rise of romanticism to the present day has been enormous" [14]. In what follows, one can mention briefly the most important elements and poets of the new trends in modern Arabic poetry as they are classified and agreed upon by most Arab scholars.

1.1. The Neoclassical Trend

In the neoclassical period, Arab poets preserved the form of classical Arabic poetry in the medieval era. The attitude of the neoclassical poets was that poetry could be composed only in the conventional classical forms, i.e. in a monometer, monorhyme, classical diction and style, dealing with certain subjects and themes. In terms of vocabulary and metaphor, the neoclassicists remained loyal to the models of their predecessors. The main objective of the neoclassical poets is to renovate the old model and highlight the magnificent experience of the

ancient Arab poets. Neoclassical poets tried to express new ideas and expand the range of their themes, however they did not allow themselves to violate the classical diction, metaphors, style and conventions. Al-Barudi (1839-1904), as most scholars maintain, was considered as the first pioneer to pave the way for other poets [12]. The renaissance of Arabic poetry begins with al-Barudi who raised poetry above the level of artificiality and, as most Arab critics and historians of literature agree, connected himself in his poems with his own immediate experience [14]. Al-Barudi's style of writing was soon followed by several Arab poets such as Shawqi (1868-1932), Hafid Ibrahim (1871-1932), al-Zahawi (1863-1936), and al-Jawahiri (1900-1997) who wrote in a neoclassical manner and used distinctive language in their poems. Shawqi was the first poet to describe contemporary events in his lyrical poetry and verse drama. His poems are very rich with real and colourful images of different societies. Those poets of the neoclassical trend shared the Western neoclassicist's belief that there are certain rules and standards of judgement that should be traced in the poems of the glorious period of the past. Unlike the western neoclassical movement as Badawi explains that the neoclassical trend in the Arab world has no philosophical foundations as it is not based upon cognisant and sophisticated theory [14]. However, Arabic neoclassicism shares with its counterpart in the West the attitude which considers that the duty of the new generation of poets is to imitate the works of such an ancient period as they represent excellent examples of good poetry. Although al-Barudi and his followers did try on the whole to preserve the conciseness, the verbal economy, tightness and simplicity of the poems of the medieval era, they imbued the old vocabulary with new life.

1.2. The Romantic Trend

This new trend in Arabic poetry comes as the result of contact with Western literature. The romantic period of poetry began with a revolution against conventional diction and themes. Most scholars agree that Mutran (1872-1949) is the leading poet to pave the way for the establishment of Arabic romantic poetry. Taha Husain (1889-1973), a distinguished Arab scholar and critic, describes Mutran as "the leader of modern Arabic poetry and the teacher of all contemporary poets without exception"[14]. His poems are distinguished by unity of structure, strangeness of subject matter and uncommonness of the imagination, as well as his deep concern with the primacy of meaning. Mutran's output in the field of Arabic literature was both large and varied; besides the many poems he composed Mutran wrote history and translated many works from French and English. Among his literary activities are his translations of some of Shakespeare's plays as well as other unpublished translations of Victor Hugo, Corneille and Paul Bourget.

Another group of Arab poets, in addition to Mutran, who had also received a western education and learned foreign languages, especially French and English, and rebelled against the principles of Arabic classical poetry upheld by neoclassicists were the mahjar or emigrant poets: the Lebanese and Syrian poet who settled in Egypt, like Mutran or in the Americas. Poets who emigrated to America were influenced not only by their Christian religious education, but also by ideas and spiritual movements such as the Masonic and Theosophical movements which were widespread in the United States at that time [23]. Gibran (1883-1931), as most Arab scholars maintain, was one of the important figures of the Mahjarite poets in the United States whose works are coloured by a revolt against the established manners of thought in social, religious and literary areas. He was behind the foundation of al-Rabitah al-Qalamiyyah (The pen league) in 1920 which was the most important

Arab literary association in New York. Several poets joined this association, including Mikhail Nu'aymah, Nasib 'arida, and Rashid Ayub. The Association's aim was as Badawi states, "to infuse new life into modern Arabic literature by turning away from the traditional excessive preoccupation with mere verbal skill"[14].

Several romantic poets in this period, whether Mahjarite or not, such as Abumadi (1889-1957), Naji (1893-1953), Ali Mahmud Taha (1902-1949), Abu-shabaka (1903-1947), al-Shabbi (1909-1934) and many others, composed numerous beautiful poems in which they describe the outer world and also succeed in expressing their inner life and their longing for a new world. In this period poets who adopted the new forms started to free themselves from the shackles of metre and rhyme; they used short metres and a lyrical and melancholic tone, which reflected their sadness and their dissatisfaction and frustration with different aspects of life. This type of poetry, as many scholars claim, encouraged translators to render it into English and other European languages, because it is very attractive and is affected by Western poetry.

Romanticism in modern Arabic poetry reached its peak between the two world wars, as most scholars agree. The war left important landmarks in the political, social and economic history of the Arab countries. Although that seems unsurprising, the distressing changes the war had brought about had a great impact on the poetry of this period. These poets became hugely more aware of the harsh political and social realities although they were criticised as being escapists from the real world in which they lived. Moreover, they successfully reflected in their poetry new themes such as homesickness, romantic sadness, doubts, the sense of anonymity in the world and the glorification of woman, themes which featured regularly in their work [14]. In general one can state, alongside many Arab scholars, that without the significant role played by such giant poets as those who moved beyond the first steps of romanticism, Arabic poetry would have been different in many ways.

1.3. The Modernist Trend

The modernist period came after the end of the Second World War. The poetry of this period is distinguished by its concentration on social problems and the wide use of ambiguous borrowings and the adaptation of themes resulting from contact with translated western poetry [1]. This period is marked by the appearance of many prominent poets such as al-Syyab (1926-1964), al-Bayaty (1926-1999), Nazik al-Mala'ika (1922-2007), Mahmud Darwish (1941-2008), Samiyh al-Qasim (1939-2014), Salah Abdulsabur (1931-1981), Adunis (b.1930), Nizar Qabbani (1923-1998) and several others. During this phase, much western poetry was translated into Arabic and its influence became evident especially the poetry of T.S. Elliot. The influence of Elliot might be seen in several aspects of Arabic poetry techniques such as structure and style, and the use of myth and allusion; aspects reflected in the poetry of al-Sayyab and Salah Abdulsabur as Badawi indicates [14]. Subsequently, most Arab poets began to employ myth and mythical symbols in their poetry, which is also ascribed to their contact with western poetry. Adunis, one of the prominent poets of this trend, employs mythical elements such as the Phoenix, Noah, and Mihyar in his poetry. Adunis together with another Arab poet, Yusuf al-khal (1917-1987), edited the magazine Shi'r "Poetry", however, in 1960 he dissociated himself from this magazine and edited his own Arabic magazine Mawaqif "Attitudes" in 1969. He justified his dissociation from Shi'r magazine saying that his aim was not to establish a new poem but to initiate a new way of poetry writing in which the emphasis would be on originality as well as the traditional distinction between all other genres of

literary writing. Adunis is also known by his radical view of old Arabic poetry, where he rejects the old Arabic conception which considered that type of poetry as something static that has to be imitated by all succeeding poets [14].

Arab poets adopted another type of poetry at this time which is known as free verse. Badr Shakir al-Sayyab and Nazik al-Mal'ika wrote important works introducing and defending this new type of poetry. In spite of its name, this type of poetry does not free poets from metre or rhyme; rather it gives them the freedom to get rid of the fixed length of line and to change the rhyme scheme [23]. Nazik al-Mala'iika occupies a prominent position in modern Arabic literature not only because of her innovative, experimental poetry, but also, as most Arab scholars maintain, because of her well-known systematic critical efforts and her views regarding important artistic, linguistic and intellectual issues in modern Arabic literature. This is regularly reflected in her own poetry and in her critical writings of the new poetic form known as free verse. Therefore, it is not surprising that al-Mala'ika's poetry and her critical theories have received attention in both the Arab countries and in the West. On the other hand, some poets who wrote in free verse abandoned all kinds of formal metrical organisation. They began to develop another form of poetry: the prose poem. This type of poetry has neither rhyme nor meter and depends on syllabic rhythm to achieve poetic effect. The prose poem is written in lyrical prose without metre or rhyme.

As mentioned above, the powerful influence of English poets such as T.S. Eliot on several Arab poets of this period in modern Arabic poetry can be clearly noticed. Eliot's influence does not only appear in structure and style, the use of mythical elements and allusion, but goes one step further as the new generation of Arab poets began to reject the false simplicity, and the sentimentality of the their own Arabic romantic poetry in favour of a charged style and subject matter; the same attitude that Eliot and his generation had taken towards romantic English poetry. In general the impact of several western poets such as Lorca (1898–1936), Edith Sitwell (1887–1964), and Yeats (1865–1939) has a remarkable effect on several Arab poets at this time in modern Arabic poetry [14].

2. Conclusion

In the light of the above one might examine, in general, some of the problematic aspects of translating Arabic poetry into English. However such aspects characterise Arabic poetry whether it belongs to the classical period or the following ones. These poetic conventions refer to certain types of expressions used in all Arabic poetry where literal translation does not convey them successfully unless the reader has been formerly informed.

Translating Arabic poetry into English is a very difficult task indeed as most scholars maintain. There are certain types of expressions which are commonplace in all Arabic poetry, and understandable in an Arabic context, but if they are translated literally into English they are either unintelligible or convey a different sense from what the poet intended unless an explanation is given.

1. In terms of vocabulary, words that mean 'time', especially "الأيام" and "الليالي" as well as both "الدهر" and "الزمن" are constantly used to indicate the vicissitudes of time, and in English they would be expressed by the use of different words such as 'fortune' or 'fate'.
2. In "الرشاء" elegy and "المدح" panegyric, all words such as dew, rain, water, sea, ocean, and clouds, imply generosity; and a great variety of metaphorical and figurative expressions go around this concept.
3. Confusion in translation as English equivalents had to be found for some Arabic words. For example words such as "دار" and "ديار" which occur in many verses of different poems, either in the singular or the plural, are rendered in different ways. However, some translators opt for the word "abode" whereas others render it into dwelling.
4. In some poems, such as Labid's Ode which is translated several times into English by more than one translator, each line ends with the same rhyming suffix, the pronoun "ها" which in Arabic means "of her", "of them" or "of it". It does not present any problem in Arabic to compose a poem in such a way, whereas in English to attempt to do so would be impossible and would turn the poem into a caricature.
5. Amatory poets often use the third person masculine forms when a woman is in fact meant. This phenomenon has puzzled many Western readers. Translators, in order to give an intelligible rendition, have to clarify this in footnotes.
6. In some cases, it is absolutely necessary in order to achieve an intelligible translation, that the translator adds some words which are implicitly and not explicitly present in Arabic language.
7. Certain expressions are sometimes used in Arabic poetry such as 'stop, my two friends "قفا صاحبي" despite the fact that the two friends are shadowy and unidentified figures who play no further part in the poem. This gives an unclear meaning in translation.
8. Another problematic aspect in translating Arabic poetry is that ancient Arabic texts make use of a large vocabulary. It is rich in words carrying highly specific meaning, which in English would require a whole phrase rather than a single word. There is also the abundance of near synonyms; for instance, there are over twenty words for the Arabic word "جماعة" each with its own specific connotation.
9. Images drawn by the Arab poets are difficult to convey in English, so the translator needs to give an explanation of these images. Furthermore, he cannot portray any of the images drawn by poets because they are mental processes by which the poet can cause his representation to be artistic, effective and creative. These images are implicit concepts to the man living in the desert, while they are very strange and not easily understood by many European translators and readers.

William Polk went so far as to visit the exact places mentioned by the Arab poet, Labid, in order to give an accurate translation. Yet, he failed to convey the same images drawn by the Arab poet. He maintains that it is very difficult to transfer the images used by the Arab poets to the English readers since they are related to a

different group of people.[26] One can examine the following instance in order to see how translation in many cases could not recapture and convey images drawn by Arab poets, since the culture, style of living, and religion are completely different.

من كل سارية وغاد مدجن وعشية متجاوب ارزامها [26]

From every unseen evening-travelling one and

dry-travelling cloud that darkens the day and night

voyager, the rumbling of thunder answers one another [26].

In the translation of this line, Polk's choice falls short of conveying the meanings of key words such as "سارية, غاد, ارزامها, عشية, مدجن". In the line cited above the Arab poet draws a majestic picture of a rainy day from morning to evening including the effect of the reverberation of thunder. The word "ارزام" used by the poet, reflects a reciprocal relation between the echo of a she-camel towards its youngster and that made by thunder towards the dehydrated desert. Both sounds are full of goodness and the promise of giving. Such a beautiful picture cannot be conveyed or grasped in another language. It is only known to those who live in the desert, those who are very keen for the sound of thunder presaging them of the coming season of rain.

10. Another problematic aspect of translating Arabic poetry is that in many cases each verse was a unit by itself, portrayed an independent picture, and was completely independent of the verse following it.

11. Thorn, heat and fire imply agony and pain, whereas coolness, water, green places imply calmness and ease.

12. In amatory poetry, all Arab poets speak about lips and smiles, but they are much more concerned with saliva and teeth. English poets talk of lips and smiles. However, the Arabic word "رضاب", for instance, is used to refer only to the saliva of the beloved. In English there is no accurate equivalent to the word "رضاب" and the English words such as saliva or moisture do not convey the same signification.

13. Arab poets use a practical expression that expresses a wish for something generally impossible "يا ليت شعري" "O that or would that".

14. Another kind of difficulty which the translator of Arabic poetry can expect to face is that of the difficult themes and thoughts that characterised the works of some Arab poets such as Ali Ahmad Sa'id (Adunis), particularly when such thoughts and themes are strange to the target language culture. As for the works of Adunis, the difficulty is more intense since it lies in his use of symbols and symbolic imagery.

15. In amatory poetry Arabic language is very rich with words referring to love, such as "الهوى ، الغرام ، العشق" ، "الصبابة ، الشوق ، الحب ، الوله". The English word "love" cannot be an accurate equivalent for each of these words, since each word in Arabic carries its own different connotation.

16. Some conventional metaphors describing war appear as a source of an allusion in Arabic poetry such as “grinding war” "حرب طاحنة" and “fierce or murderous war” "حرب ضروس". In such examples, which are used as collocations in the Arabic language, the war is described as a millstone grinding people to powder. They can give rise to second-language learning difficulties and problems of translation equivalence.

17. In Arabic poetry, poets tend to use the word "ثغر" to refer to the mouth of the beloved. Paradoxically the English word mouth for the Arabic word "ثغر" only reduces the effect and makes the translation tasteless. Moreover, the Arabic word "ثغر" specifies a female's open lips while mouth in English can be applied to both male and female and can be either open or closed. This shows Arabic poetic richness at the level of words in contrast with English and presents a set of connotative relations which re-echo the organic unity, thematic depth and aesthetic dimension. In translating the Arabic word "ثغر" to English, the word “lips” would be a more suitable, if not marvellous, alternative than “mouth.”

Surely no two translators can give a similar version of an Arabic poem if one takes two versions of the same poem, one would easily discover how much they differ in length, shape, style, tone and the way their lines are organised. Certainly there is no specific method for translating poetry, because of the linguistic differences as well as those of culture, religion, and way of life.

From the above discussion one would say that understanding the difference between both languages, Arabic and English, is the first and foremost step of any translation act and to understand it correctly three factors, namely, the author, the text and the reader must all be counted in so that meaning is best determined and a perfect piece of translation is produced. Problems of translation between Arabic and English fall within two categories: linguistic and cultural. One would say that the argument presented so far is that the act of Arabic poetry translation is guided by certain strategies. One of these accounts for the systematic differences between the two languages Arabic and English. The other depends on the type of poetry used in any individual text. Both these strategies should be put into the translators' account while dealing with Arabic poetry translation into English. Moreover, the translator has to preserve the aesthetic elements of the poems, which pose another challenge. The aesthetic values, according to Newmark, are dependent on the structure (or poetic structure), metaphor, and sound [16]. Poetic structure includes the plan of the original poem as a whole and the shape and the balance of the individual sentences in each line. A translator cannot ignore any element that might contribute to the beauty of the whole text; he may order them depending on the nature of the poem translated.

Another problematic aspect for Arabic poetry translators is related to the domain of culture. Words or expressions that contain cultural indications from certain types of problems as pointed out earlier in this article. The socio-cultural problems exist in the phrases, clauses, or sentences containing words related to various cultural categories, namely: ideas, behaviour, product, and ecology. The "ideas" includes belief, values, and institution; "behaviour" includes customs or habits, "products" includes art, music, and "ecology" includes planets, animals, plains, winds, and weather. All these types of problems need to be dealt with properly by the translator in accordance with the solutions proposed by scholars working in the domain, in order to produce adequate versions.

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